'Being at the university is a retreat!': a Black female student teacher's views on the role of the university

Carlos Alberto Tirado Taipe[*] & Johan Wassermann

Department of Humanites Education, Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

*Correspondence to: carlos.tirado.taipe@up.ac.za

Abstract

This article sets out to understand what the views of Ruvimbo, a Black female student teacher, are on the role of the university, and how and why these views emerged. The social philosophy of higher education of Ronald Barnett was used as a theoretical framework, and arts-informed methods such as drawings and photovoice, were used for data construction. The student teacher recognised the university–knowledge relationship but foregrounded her appreciation of having a safe and pleasant environment, developing cultural tolerance, and developing herself as a human being. Her view contradicts the predominant concern about the transformation and decolonisation of the curriculum in South Africa as a way of attaining epistemic justice, and claim for a more ecological approach to university education.

Keywords: Student teachers; teacher education; student voice; university role; arts-informed methods

Introduction

What constitutes a university and its main roles are a matter for debate (Barnett, 2013). The university has changed over time and consequently so has its roles. In this context, knowing and listening to the views of the students as stakeholders on the role of the university in the present affects the core of the university as it relates to teaching, learning and research. This study is focused on the views of a single Black female student teacher on the role of the university. In this regard, a 'student teacher' or 'pre-service teacher' is one who studies education at the university as a first career choice (Varadharajan et al., 2018) and who is not yet teaching professionally (Fajet et al., 2005).

Our purpose is to explore the voice of one student teacher as a way to provide a porthole into what it might represent in terms of other similar views. As a single young Black female student from a township in South Africa, Ruvimbo had to adapt to a traditionally White institution of higher learning (Nyamnjoh, 2016), namely the University of Pretoria. Students like her, being both Black and female, find it more difficult to get ahead in South Africa when compared to any other grouping. This is rooted in the double oppression of being both Black and female. We attempted to gain an understanding of the university through her eyes, without generalising our findings. Ruvimbo's views can be regarded as providing an alternative view, another voice, one that we do not hear regularly either in the news or on social media, where political activists and their views and voices tend to dominate. For students like her, the university is a wonderful retreat, which provides an opportunity to learn, to interact with different people, and to develop so as to fulfil her personal dreams and ambitions.

We accept that there are different and contradictory views on the roles of the university as stated by the university stakeholders (Cheong & Ming, 1997). These different stakeholders include, amongst others, corporations, governments, civil organisations, families and teachers. Barnett (2013) affirms that the views on what constitutes a university are numerous, to the extent that he refers to a conceptual anarchy. For example, according to Lategan (2009), there are three dominant views of the university in South Africa. There is the ivory tower idea where the university is understood as a self-governance institution with academic freedom at all costs. Additionally, the university is viewed as an institution that provides a new social role by fostering personal development for its students. Finally, the third view is the Napoleonic ideal of the university where the state primarily rules the institution. Others believe that the university has a role to play in shaping the character of students (Karabel, 2005), in preparing students to be employed (Kerr, 2001; Mingat, 1998, as cited in Tomasevski, 2003; World Bank, 2009), or in preparing them to be useful for government and industry (Smith & Webster, 1997a).

In academia, there is no agreement about what the roles of the university are. However, there is consensus that the traditional roles of the university are teaching, learning and research (Calhoun, 2006; Le Grange, 2009). Community engagement is not viewed as a traditional role of the university. According to Lategan (2009, p. 59), for 'traditionalist' opinion-makers, the roles of teaching, learning and research are ways for the university to perform its community engagement role. 'Progressivists/pragmatists', on the other hand, consider active community engagement as an additional role of the university beyond society's scientific needs.

One of the key opinion-makers not mentioned above are the students. Student views are conceived as any feedback or judgements provided in formal and/or informal settings concerning their university experience (Fielding, 2001; Lamanauskas et al., 2012). However, the voice of the students is not necessarily considered as being equal to the formal voice of other opinion-makers from the same university, corporations or associations related to the university (Tinto, 2017). Regardless, students have different and contradictory views on the role of the university. Some of them are: to provide a degree to enable students to acquire better jobs and develop future careers (Tinto, 2017); to lead social transformation that fights for the eradication of race and economic exclusion in all its forms, whether it directly affects them or not (Kelley, 2016); to provide free university education, greater government involvement and investment in the public education system (Amnesty International, 2012); or to be socially and locally accountable to their communities (Bellei et al., 2014).

In the case of South Africa, there are studies that have examined the views of student teachers. There are studies on the views of student teachers with regard to: the current state of school education (Matoti, 2010); student teachers' experiences of teaching practice (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009; Matoti & Odora, 2013); their views on educational tools or methodologies (Van Wyk, 2017); their perceptions of their university education at South African universities (Gravett et al., 2011); and how well the University of South Africa prepares its students for the teaching profession (Mokoena, 2012), amongst others. However, there has been little or no research on student teachers' views on the roles of the university, and more specifically on the views of a Black female student teacher from a township. Hence the necessity for this study.

Theoretical position

The social philosophy of higher education of Ronald Barnett is the theoretical framework for this study (Barnett, 2011, 2013, 2016, 2018). Barnett affirms that 'the university is dead' (Barnett, 2000c, p. 22), a comment made in relation to a new relationship between the university and knowledge that is deeply related to the university identity. In a contemporary world, the notion of knowledge or truth with its metaphysical sense of arrival, finality or as secure sense of proceeding needs to be changed. Barnett (2000c) explains that as part of the 'end of knowledge' as a pure, objective reading of the world, the university as an institution has to develop a new epistemological consciousness of its own insecurities, since universities are no longer the only preserver of knowledge. In this contemporary era, knowledge has evolved to be a public good, accessible to many through ways other than from the university and with a rapid capacity to become outdated.

In this scenario, Barnett's social philosophy of higher education focuses on being and ontology rather than on knowledge and epistemology (Barnett, 2015). Barnett states that it is possible to develop a human being who can adapt to a changing and uncertain world. He concludes that the key to modern reality is not a problem of knowledge; it is one of 'being'. Hence, he affirms that knowledge should be displaced from the core of all pedagogies. The students' being has to take centre stage (Barnett, 2000a).

A key concept cluster related to the social philosophy of higher education of Barnett is supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000a). Supercomplexity describes multiple frameworks that affect the condition of universities, causing uncertainties and challenges (Bengtsen, 2018). Barnett defines supercomplexity as 'the multiplication of frameworks that people use to understand the world' (Barnett, 2000a, p. 6). This multiplication of frameworks characterises the world where people currently live and, most of the time, these frameworks have conflict among themselves and do not have an end (Barnett, 2000a). Hence, the university must live amid numerous and contesting rival accounts of situations, such that there can be no ultimate settlement. According to Barnett, the situation of higher education today has become supercomplex as it is 'not just a matter of handling overwhelming data and theories within a given frame of reference (a situation of complexity) but also a matter of handling multiple frames of understanding, of action and of self-identity' (Barnett, 2000a, p. 6). Hence, as per Barnett (2000b), the supercomplex modern world impacts the character of the university curriculum.

Another important concept is that of the ecological university. This is a proposal by Barnett for a type of university that has a care towards the whole world and does what it can to be of good for the world (Barnett, 2011), namely, seeking its well-being and in so doing fulfiling its civic role (Barnett, 2000a). There are specific ways for the university to fulfil its civic role by, from one side, expanding the frames of understanding as part of the world, and from the other, in assisting in the assimilation of these understandings. In this sense, the ecological university does not simply serve the interest of the world, but contributes to defining the interest of the world, seeking to transcend world sustainability (which includes the university's own sustainability) in its concern with well-being and flourishing (Barnett, 2013).

Barnett describes the ecological university as a university-for-the-other. He contrast this type of university with the research university (which is a university-in-itself) or the entrepreneurial university (which is a university-for-itself) Barnett, 2013). The ecological

university has an interest in well-being rather than only sustainability. The well-being purpose looks to a continuous flourishing of the many ecologies that intersect with it, and sustainability looks for a given state of equilibrium. The ecological university is a profession of faith in the university as well as being responsible for imagining feasible possibilities for the university (Barnett, 2018). In ethically justifiable ways, the university is related to its many intertwined ecologies (persons, institutions, economic and physical world) and should keep its autonomy for itself. In this way, the ecological university sustains a critical function for itself, as well as critiquing the dominant discourses of the age (Barnett, 2013). In other words, the university should evolve to be a space for critical voices in and towards the supercomplex world.

As part of Barnett's theoretical and philosophical focus on being and ontology, there are practical implications of this theory related to our study. Barnett (2007) affirms that the ecological university requires the student to develop an understanding of the other, as new positions in the world. Teachers must help students acquire the qualities of courage, wonderment and willingness to act, develop resilience, feel uncertainty, respond to uncertainty, and gain confidence to insert themselves amid the numerous counter-claims to which they are exposed.

Barnett's (2007, p. 1) 'pedagogy of air' is another practical implication of this theory. Barnett argues that, in a supercomplex world, the contemporary university should foster courage in students. This pedagogy of air opens up spaces for students to learn amid uncertainty, and, in the process, it enables students to develop their own voice in response to the uncertainties of an unpredictable, contentious and challenging world (Barnett, 2000a). All these aspects are mainly matters of 'being' (Barnett, 2000a, 2007), and not epistemic ones. In other words, it promotes a new mode of being (Barnett & Coate, 2005), of humanness. Hence, for Barnett, students need a pedagogical space to gain control of themselves amid increasing uncertainty. We consider the theoretical proposal of Barnett as useful to examine, analyse and explain the views of Ruvimbo, a Black female student teacher from a township on the role of the university, as the focus of our study.

Methodology

This study has an exploratory case study design (Rule & Vaughn, 2011). As such, it is a detailed, systematic and in-depth investigation (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of a Black female student teacher from a township to generate knowledge. Ruvimbo was recruited in September 2017, as part of an intensive, diverse and creative process, which included email invitations, visits to classes, informal conversations, invitation advertisements and flyers on notice boards, and posts on Facebook, MSN and WhatsApp. Ruvimbo is part of a growing demographic at a traditionally Afrikaner, White, influential academic institution in South Africa, namely the University of Pretoria (Nyamnjoh, 2016).

Our purpose was to explore the case of one student teacher to represent other similar views, but without generalising. As a case is a specific example of something that belongs to a larger category of instances (Rule & Vaughn, 2011), we were able to use it in our methodology. In this regard, Ruvimbo's voice is an echo of silence that needs to be brought to the fore to break the seeming one-sidedness of students' voices on the contemporary role of the university in South Africa (Mutekwe, 2017; Vandeyar & Swart, 2019).

An arts-informed case study research design was employed in the study. Following Christensen (et al., 2015), an arts-informed case study methodology is multi-method in nature. This means that diverse data construction methods such as interviews, written documents, photographs taken, and introspective analysis were included. This design was chosen because it involves working with rich verbal, visual and written data as part of an inductive approach. We called these methods 'construction methods' rather than 'data collection methods', since we wanted to promote interaction and collaboration between the authors and Ruvimbo. Our aim was to construct knowledge together (Creswell, 2007). We sought to understand the social reality and her views on the role of the university, on 'her own terms' (Bryman et al., 2019, p.356).

A crystallisation process of the data analysis was conducted. The use of several sources of data in a study is commonly referred to as triangulation (Bryman et al., 2019). However, Ellingson (2014) uses the term 'crystallisation' to describe a postmodern-influenced approach to triangulation. Richardson and Adams (2018) invoked the crystal as an alternative metaphor to the 'two dimensional', 'three sides', fixed and rigid triangle to approach the world. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves. They concluded that what the researcher sees depends on his/her angle of repose.

The methodological process of this study consisted of two stages, each of which consisted of two meetings of 70 minutes, with a time period of four weeks in between. In stage one, an in-depth, individual semi-structured interview was conducted that included the use of drawings. Ruvimbo was asked to create a drawing to facilitate a clear expression of her views on the role of the university as an institution. During the interview, she explained what she was trying to depict in her drawings regarding her views, the reasons for drawing her pictures as she did, and why she felt these views emerged. At the end of stage one, Ruvimbo received instructions to take ten reflective digital photographs (photovoice) about what her views on the role of the university were. In stage two, the ten reflective digital photographs taken by Ruvimbo were printed in colour by the lead author. A similar type of interview using the photographs was applied. This study used photovoice as part of a collaborative research process and for elicitation (Prosser & Burke, 2008).

We conducted this study considering one author as an insider as well as an outsider. The lead author was a Peruvian PhD student studying at the same university as Ruvimbo. By not being a South African, the lead author acted as a foreign observer who provided a fresh and authentic lens to a familiar topic (Trow, 2006). An advantage was the possibility to stand outside the context and to provide a new, rich and fresh perspective to the academic discussions on the views of a Black female student teacher from a township on the role of the university.

Reflections on the data constructed

Ruvimbo was the sole participant in this study. At the time of research, she was a full-time second-year undergraduate B.Ed. student, who was part of the contact education modality at the University of Pretoria (2018). This large residential university in South Africa has two modalities of education: contact study and online distance study programmes.

Ruvimbo identifies as Xhosa and has two brothers. She grew up in Tembisa, the second largest township on the East Rand of the Gauteng province in South Africa. She came from a family that valued education; her parents and all three of her aunts on her mother's side

studied at a university. In her first year at the university, Ruvimbo funded her own studies. During her second year, she obtained a National Student Financial Aid Scheme bursary (NSFAS), which paid for her tuition and accommodation. During this time, she also did part-time jobs over weekends to cover her expenses. From her first year, Ruvimbo was a leader in student organisations as well as in student societies at her university.

From the arts-based data co-constructed by Ruvimbo, we coded several views held by her on the role of the university. Ruvimbo became part of these reflections by reviewing the transcriptions of her in-depth individual interviews on her arts productions. Through this member reflection process (Tracy, 2010), she had opportunities to engage in dialogue about the study's findings and was able to ask questions, critique, provide feedback, affirm, and even collaborate. She was thus part of the continual verification of our opinions, predilections and findings as the key participant in the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). One of Ruvimbo's views was that the university has a role to play in providing a physical space that is safe and pleasant for students, which in her case it did. She described her home in Tembisa as unsafe, old, depressing, oppressing and out of order, so for her, being at the university was a safe space. She explained that at the university campus, she could peacefully rest outdoors in contrast to Tembisa where insecurity, hopelessness, poverty and negativity surrounded people. Ruvimbo elaborated:

> For us being at school is as a retreat! Because we are actually away from that environment [her home in Tembisa], because it is safe. The other day, I had a nap, here on campus, under a tree. It was the best nap that I ever had. Now, in such environment [her township], you are not going to sleep, because your guards are always up. Even when you walk on the streets, even you see the people around. You can see people's dreams being broken day in and day out. A sense of hopelessness! … In essence, the university is like an escape.

With reference to the above, Ruvimbo also stated that the university should provide a space that is socially safe. She argued that the university should be an open space for the responsible expression of views. In this regard, she drew a face with dots as part of her traditional Xhosa face art. Ruvimbo commented that during primary school, she went to detention for speaking Xhosa and not English which was detrimental to her. Hence, Ruvimbo stated that a role of the university is to create a space that is socially safe where students can be themselves, expressing the uniqueness of their cultures.
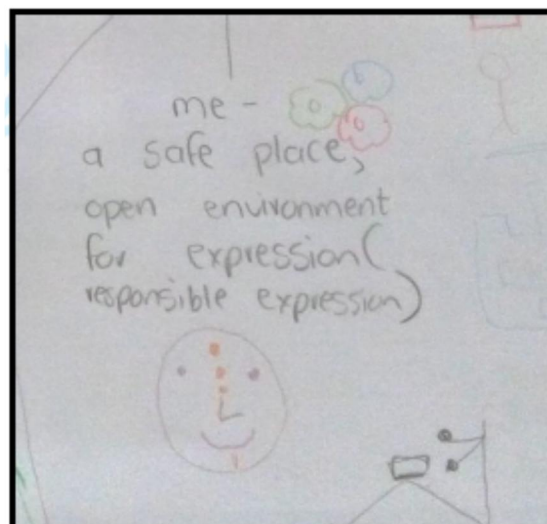
In the view of Ruvimbo, a pleasant space can uplift students' spirits. To support her view, she took a photograph of jacaranda trees of the area where students walk every day. According to Ruvimbo, this photograph represented the importance of having a clean and positive physical space. She elaborated: '[The university should] make sure that the environment … be good enough or it is positive enough for people to interact with.'


Ruvimbo also stated that a pleasant space encourages students to study. She highlighted the importance of having a positive environment, especially in terms of living in university accommodation, to help them to progress in their university studies. She provided a personal testimony and described experiences of her classmates related to this topic:

> I have seen students who had to travel back and forth, from home to the university … if they are lucky enough, they went [to the university] until first year, if you are lucky! [she emphasised it]. After first year, the fight is so much and you ended up for giving up! Because of all these struggles. For me to move to a residence, it was good … it's a must! [she emphasised] if you are going to make it! To progress in your studies … it is not just about you going to class; it is about the environment that you are 24 hours. You need to be in a positive environment continuously in order to move forward.

Ruvimbo's next view on the role of the university was that it should contribute to the students' understanding that people of different races are connected, and that students' individual cultures are important. To explain her view, Ruvimbo drew people from different races relating to each other. She wanted to emphasise that all the university students, no matter what their race, should be connected and not stand as individuals. Ruvimbo explained:

> … they [the students] need to make sure that there is a connection between the different races, because in the real world there is need to be a connection. So, through the different programmes that they [the universities] have … They need to promote that people work together regardless of their race and colour …
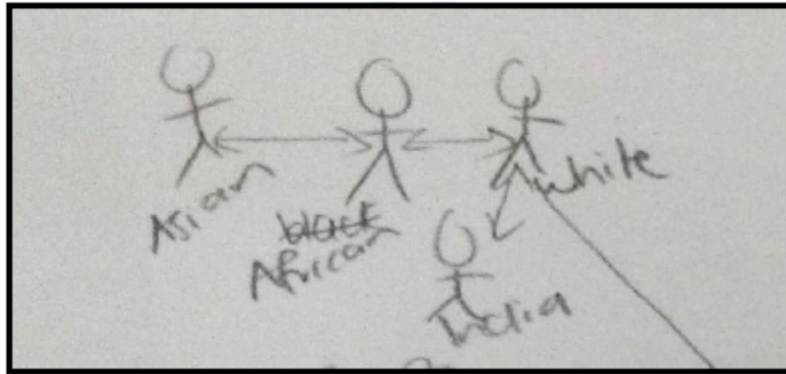
Alongside the above, Ruvimbo affirmed that the university has a responsibility to strengthen students' individual cultural identities. She explained:

> … as a university, they need to ensure that these things [referring to cultural identity and cultural diversity] are integrated or they are not dissolved through whatever happens on campus … I stand for keeping the individualism and do not lose it in the community emphasis.

Apart from strengthening students' individual cultural identities, Ruvimbo also viewed the role of the university as needing to foster students' individual and community transformation by developing the skills and abilities related to responsible leadership, teamwork and community building capacities, so as to provide sustainability to society. In this regard, Ruvimbo took a photograph of the advertisement of the Centre for Responsible Leadership at her university to express her view on the role of the university. Ruvimbo related her experience to people's claim to respect their rights with the responsibility that it implies, especially in the case of the leaders. She noted this in the following way:

> … often time we hear of rights … all have the right to, or should be able to do that, but there is little emphasis to the responsibility that comes with that. For responsible leadership … is a lot of emphasis on the beneficiaries and the impact that the leader has on the people who are leading rather than developing the individual leader. So [being a responsible leader], it is just being able to make unselfish decisions that have positive impacts …

In relation to this, according to Ruvimbo, the university should develop teamwork and community-building capacities in students. Consequently, Ruvimbo drew a person connected to a group by an arrow. To support her view, Ruvimbo provided two reasons. Firstly, she felt that the university environment was complex and too big to interact inside of it alone, as an individual; and secondly, she believed that promoting community-building provided more sustainability to communities rather than fostering individual projects. Ruvimbo expounded:

> I think there is a notion that within the university there is individualism because you can be alone, but I feel that a lot of the time when you actually get here there is more working together than being alone. Because the structure is so big, even at class, you cannot do anything by yourself … when you get here, you need a group study; when you do assignments, you need to do it with a group of people. When you want to know the town or the environment, you need to know other people. There is nothing that you can do by yourself!. [She continued:] … we were taught that we need to make communities rather than individuals. That is generally the content that we learnt in class … we are encouraged to build communities rather than to build a mansion … also working as a team, rather that again individualism. It is basically, community versus individualism …

Linked to fostering individual transformation, Ruvimbo's next view on the role of the university was that it should empower students with the knowledge and skills to fulfil their personal dreams.

To support her view, Ruvimbo took a photograph of a mural at her residence where it was written 'Dreams'. Ruvimbo described that what brings students to the university is their desire to fulfil their dreams and the role of the university is therefore to encourage students to fulfil their personal aspirations. She acknowledged that the university was a central place where students have several resources; hence, the university had to make its resources accessible to students to fulfil their dreams:

> I think that it is what brings everyone at the university, because all have dreams … essentially, that's we all are here, because we are chasing dreams. The university gives us that channel, platform to fulfil our dreams, to build up our dreams, or to go forward these dreams … the personal aspiration that we have.

How then did these views come about? It is necessary to understand the sources of these views. Ruvimbo initially identified the living conditions of her place of origin as a cause that influenced her views on the role of the university. She compared people's quality of life in Tembisa, her township, and its surrounding areas. She recognised that Whites bought more groceries than people from her township, who were mostly Black. She also perceived differences in the sizes of the houses, gardens or school infrastructure. Daily, she was confronted with these inequalities in terms of income, quality of life and access to educational services. Alongside her reflections on the conditions of her place of origin, Ruvimbo reflected on the negative consequences of a hopeless and disintegrated community. She contrasted the physical surroundings of her community to that of the university and valued that the institution was structured in a way that allowed it to achieve its goals. Her reflections caused her to value the establishment of a clear direction and unity in the community.

Ruvimbo's reflection on herself also determined her views on the role of the university. Before she enrolled at the university, Ruvimbo had a gap of two years. During this time, she studied radio production, started an internship at a radio station, and spent time in her township. This time helped her to clarify her self-identity and life purpose. Her reflections about herself convinced her to choose an educational career so as to impact people's lives meaningfully.

The influence of her mother also influenced Ruvimbo's views on the role of the university. Her mother, whom she admires a lot, set her an educational and professional example. Ruvimbo was raised by her mother as part of a Xhosa family. She did not know her natural father but was positively influenced by her stepfather. Ruvimbo explained that her mother was a primary school teacher in a public school, initially in Tembisa and then in the Eastern Cape. Her mother taught her how to use a computer. Ruvimbo acknowledged that the good example of her mother caused her to admire the strong leadership of a hardworking teacher. Also, Ruvimbo acknowledged that her mother's strictness sheltered her from bad influences. This influence caused her to value living responsibly.

A further source of Ruvimbo's views on the university was the influence of her role models. We coded two role models for Ruvimbo: Beyoncé and Matsi Modise. Beyoncé is a famous pop star and performer. Ruvimbo acknowledged Beyoncé's professionalism and influence, which led Ruvimbo to value the hard work that leads people to develop their professional skills. Beyoncé's hard-working spirit caused Ruvimbo to appreciate being a hard-working

person too. Similarly, Ruvimbo was inspired by Beyoncé's positive influence on people's lives, since some of her friends had adopted good habits by watching Beyoncé's videos and documentaries.

Matsi Modise was the other role model for Ruvimbo. Ms. Modise is a successful business entrepreneur, whom Ruvimbo met in 2016 when the aforementioned was a manager of an organisation that worked for the South African government. Ms. Modise helped entrepreneurs and had meetings with Ruvimbo once every three months to share her experience. In one instance, Ms. Modise paid Ruvimbo's rent and groceries.

Ruvimbo's omnipresent fear of being poor and broke was the final cause that influenced her views on the role of the university. Ruvimbo acknowledged her fears of being poor time and again and her fear of returning to that poverty, especially after having seen a regression in some community members in Tembisa.

Referring to Ruvimbo's fears, shared throughout the interview, we coded two of her decisions to avoid being broke and poor. Her first decision was to plan for and work on her future to increase her well-being. In this regard, her fears caused her to appreciate what she had and to value the importance of planning to meet her needs and accomplish her goals. Her economic fears also encouraged her to enrol in different modules and activities at the university. She studied history, geography and business and participated in several extra-curricular activities at the university. Ruvimbo acknowledged that her fears had caused her to seek personal growth by being involved in experiences and developing different skills:

> They [her modules and activities] are like bricks. If I would like to build up a mansion, I need a million bricks to build it. That's why I need all these experiences and skills because I feel myself grow …

Courageously Ruvimbo's way to face her fear of being broke was to establish ambitious goals. Her fears caused her to establish ambitious goals to prevent being caught wanting. She concluded: ' … that's why, if I am extremely rich [by establishing ambitious goals], in the worse scenario, I will be normal … '.

Discussion

In the era of massification and the predominance of an entrepreneurial university model, this study provides a counterpoint on the role of the university as an institution from the view of a Black female student from a township. Following Zgaga (2012), contradictions and dichotomies in Barnett's ideas were observed, which encouraged us to identify new possibilities for a new kind of university in the midst of a supercomplex world. In this scenario, a holistic approach to the university is needed.

There is a need for a more holistic approach to the university rather than the seeming singular approach of epistemic justice. The concern about the transformation and decolonisation of the curriculum in South Africa as a way of attaining epistemic justice seems to be important for some (Mheta et al., 2018; Vandeyar & Swart, 2019; Walker, 2019), but it was not viewed as such by Ruvimbo. Instead, she unpacked a supercomplex reality (Barnett, 2000a) as a female student teacher. Ruvimbo concurred with Barnett by explaining her reality was characterised by multiple, overwhelming and contentious frameworks. She used different frameworks to understand her university world: the reality of her township; her family background; her

school and university experiences; the influence of her role models; and her reflections about herself. In the midst of this multiplication of frameworks, this African female student from Tembisa found herself understanding her world through contentious frameworks, as Barnett explained.

Ruvimbo faced contradictory frameworks as a student teacher. As per Barnett (2000a), she contrasted, for example, her unsafe, unpleasant and hopeless reality of her township with the university environment that was safe, clean, positive, pleasant and uplifting to enable her to fulfil her personal dreams. She found contradictions between her disintegrated and individualistic community and the structured, planned and community-building orientation of the university. Similarly, Ruvimbo faced contradictions caused by inequalities in terms of income, quality of life and access to educational services among Black people who lived in Tembisa, and Whites who lived in its surrounding areas and who now shared the university spaces with her. These contradictory frameworks caused uncertainties and challenges in her (Bengtsen, 2018), which, surpassed by their complexity, the unique attainment of epistemic justice approach as part of a curriculum reform in South Africa. As per Ruvimbo, the supercomplexity of the modern university that she described, requires a more holistic view, an ecological view of the university and its students in general (Barnett, 2000a, 2013), specially female students. There is a need to consider the physical and social environment provided for students, as well as to foster students' individual and community development opportunities, among other aspects.

Much is known about the so-called traditional roles of the university (Lategan, 2009), but little is known about the role of the university in providing a physical space that is clean and pleasant (as in Ruvimbo's photograph of the jacarandas) and how this factor influences the other roles of the university as an institution. In this regard, the drawings and photographs constructed by Ruvimbo recognised the concept of the university as a 'second home' or as a 'retreat'. This positive perception is contrasted with her description of her township. This reveals a gap in the academic literature that requires further study about student teachers, especially in the case of female students.

In a supercomplex world, the university as an institution has to develop a new epistemological consciousness of its own insecurities. Barnett (2000c) describes the 'end of knowledge', which refers to the fact that universities are no longer the only preserver of knowledge. Knowledge has evolved to be for the public good, accessible to many through ways different from the university and with a rapid capacity to become outdated. Ruvimbo explained this by describing lessons that she had learnt outside the university, which explained the source of her views on the role of the university, namely, the influence of her mother, her reflections on the living conditions of her place of origin, and her understanding of herself, her role models, and extra-curricular activities. Her views concur with the social philosophy of higher education (Barnett, 2015), which stands for a new epistemological position of the university.

Barnett's social philosophy of higher education focuses on being and ontology rather than on knowledge and epistemology (Barnett, 2015) was confirmed. One of the main findings of this study is that the South African university, and this institution in general, has as its main role the fostering of individual student transformation. Ruvimbo referred specifically to that as developing students as human beings; valuing their cultural identity; developing responsible leadership, racial appreciation, and resilience; seeking personal growth and well-being; and

generating capacities such as teamwork across cultural and racial boundaries, and community-building ones.

What is perhaps most striking is that the roles of the university to do research and to provide a degree, which could be referred to as the epistemic role of the university, are not foregrounded by Ruvimbo. The literature (Lategan, 2009; Molla & Cuthbert, 2018; Republic of South Africa, 2013) is challenged insofar as this Black female student teacher from a township seemingly does not consider the main role of the university as providing a degree, nor does she view this as the main reason for her to attend university, as other studies affirm (Lamanauskas et al., 2012; Tinto, 2017). Instead, according to Ruvimbo, the teaching and learning approach should be such that it develops students as human beings or in their personhood dimension, more so than a university model focused on profit. Based on this study, much attention should be given to the teaching and learning approach the university should follow.

Ruvimbo's view that the role of the university as an institution, is to value and develop students as people resonates with Barnett's pedagogy of air (Barnett, 2007). In this regard, Barnett argues that, in a supercomplex world, the contemporary university should enable students to develop their own voice or to achieve their own dreams in response to the uncertainties of an unpredictable, contentious and challenging world (Barnett, 2000a). This pedagogy of air opens up spaces for students such as Ruvimbo to learn amid uncertainty or in the midst of community and personal challenges. In other words, this pedagogy promotes a new mode of being (Barnett & Coate, 2005), of humanness, exactly what Ruvimbo affirmed as a key role of the university.

Ruvimbo clearly stands for an ecological university, as a university-for-the-other (Barnett, 2013). As described by Barnett (2013), this type of university contrasts with the research university (which is a university-in-itself) or the entrepreneurial university (which is a university-for-itself). This ecological university has an interest in the well-being and continuous flourishing of the many ecologies that intersect with it, rather than seeking sustainability, which looks for a given state of equilibrium. Ruvimbo's thinking is largely ecological since she seeks personal growth for her own well-being, but also aims to improve her community. She recognised the concept of a research university (university-in-itself), but did not foreground it as a main role of the university. Similarly, she wanted the university as an institution, to be efficient but in a different way from the entrepreneurial university.

Ruvimbo acted efficiently by choosing her educational career to impact people's lives meaningfully, especially her community; by seeking personal growth through being involved in experiences and developing different skills through several extra-curricular activities at the university; and by planning and establishing ambitious goals to prevent being caught wanting. Her background shaped her to be resilient and to seek self-actualisation to change her community. Her reasons for being efficient were largely different from the seeming profitable approach of an entrepreneurial university. As a female student teacher, she stood for fulfiling her civic role by seeking her own and community well-being rather than sustainability. As stated by Barnett (2013), the ecological university fulfils its civic role by seeking the well-being and flourishing of its students and the surrounding community.

Regardless that this study was conducted in the midst of the #FeesMustFall student protests, and that Ruvimbo was a student leader, her response was to acknowledge her local university as her 'second home' and to keep on studying. She decided not to engage with the university

shut down or protest against it. There appeared to be a conservative student preference, as with students like Ruvimbo, who preferred to study, avoid distractions or be overtly politically active or radical. In the midst of a supercomplex world (Barnett, 2000a), full of uncertainties and challenges, this Black female student teacher valued being proactive, so as to transform her poor background. The inspiration of her parents and other role models to work hard as a way to improve their well-being seemed to encourage her to study harder rather than to protest and to seek epistemic justice as a way to improve her education. This provides a counterpoint with regards to protests, a topic that requires further research.

Conclusions

Ruvimbo's views in this study expressed a *zeitgeist* of where the university is. Currently the university suffers pressures from a culture of audit and assessment in the name of greater accountability, also called managerialism. Crowded campuses reduce individual attention, making learning more anonymous and self-determined, among other aspects (Smith & Webster, 1997b). These pressures jeopardise and neglect human aspects, provoking protests that claim changes in the current university project.

The preference observed in Ruvimbo's views as a Black female student teacher on the role of the university seemingly concurs with demanding a change in the foregrounded roles of the university. This student teacher strongly emphasises two aspects. Firstly, there is a need for a more holistic or ecological approach to the role of the university considering the multiple and contentious frameworks as part of the supercomplexity of the modern world. The predominant epistemological discussion around the transformation and decolonisation of the curriculum at South African universities as a way of attaining epistemic justice, which is a silence in this study, requires a broader approach. Ruvimbo described other sources of knowledge outside of the university as well as several frameworks of understanding her reality, different from the epistemological ones.

Secondly, it is claimed that the university as an institution has as its main role the fostering of student individual transformation. Ruvimbo, as a Black female student teacher from a township represents a role of the university in which students develop as human beings or in their personhood dimension, rather than epistemologically doing research or gaining a degree. It is a student demand to change the university knowledge project for a university based on an ontological project where 'being' is more important. For students like Ruvimbo, the university is a wonderful retreat, which provides an opportunity to learn, interact with people from different races, and to develop in her personal capacity to fulfil her personal dreams and ambitions.

We believe that Ruvimbo's views are an echo of other students' views that need to be brought to the fore to break the seeming one-sidedness of students' voices. Ruvimbo is part of a growing demographic population of Black female students from townships at traditionally former White higher education institutions in South Africa who will become teachers with a clearly important role in the present and future of many young learners of the schools of this country. Being Black and female, Ruvimbo's views on the roles of the university strongly challenge the still present race and gender burden of oppression. Besides, based on Ruvimbo's views on the role of the university, we can have a sense of the teacher performance of similar student teachers in future, since they would in all probability transfer their views on the role of the university to how they see the role of a school.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Carlos Alberto Tirado Taipe is an educational practitioner, researcher and a lecturer of the Department of Ancient and Modern Languages and Cultures (Faculty of Humanities) of the University of Pretoria. His research interests include student teachers, teacher education, student voice, university role and arts-informed methods. He has published several educational materials for teachers, worked for the Educational Peruvian government and in several educational non-governmental organisations in Peru.

Johan Wassermann is a professor of history education at the University of Pretoria and also the Head of Department of Humanities Education. He is the co-founder of the African Association for History Education (AHE-Afrika). His research interests include youth and history, life histories, history textbooks, teaching controversial issues in post-conflict Africa, and minorities and the minoritised in colonial Natal. He has published more than 60 peer-reviewed articles and chapters dealing with both history and history education.

References

Amnesty International. (2012). *Amnesty International Report 2012. The state of the World´s human rights*.

Barnett, R. (2000a). *Realizing the university in an age of supercomplexity*. Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Barnett, R. (2000b). Supercomplexity and the curriculum. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25(3), 255–265. https://doi.org/10.1080/713696156

Barnett, R. (2000c). University knowledge in an age of supercomplexity. *Higher Education*, 40(4), 409–422. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004159513741

Barnett, R. (2007). *A will to learn: Being a student in an age of uncertainty*. McGraw-Hill/Open University Press.

Barnett, R. (2011). *Being a university* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Barnett, R. (2013). *Imagining the university*. Routledge.

Barnett, R. (2015). *Thinking and rethinking the university: The selected works of Ronald Barnett*. World Library of Educationalists Series.

Barnett, R. (2016). *Understanding the university: Institution, idea, possibilities*. Foundations and futures of education.

Barnett, R. (2018). *The ecological university: A feasible utopia*. Routledge.

Barnett, R., & Coate, K. (2005). *Engaging the curriculum in higher education.* Society for Research into Higher Education, Open University Press.

Bellei, C., Cabalin, C., & Orellana, V. (2014). The 2011 Chilean student movement against neoliberal educational policies. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(3), 426–440. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.896179

Bengtsen. (2018). Supercomplexity and the University: Ronald Barnett and the social philosophy of higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 72(1), 65–74. doi.: 10.1111/hequ.12153.

Bryman, A., Bell, E., & Harley, B. (2019). *Business research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Calhoun, C. (2006). The university and the public good. *Thesis Eleven*, 84(February 2006), 7–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513606060516

Cheong, Y., & Ming, W. (1997). Multimodels of quality in education. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 5(1), 22–31. https://doi.org/10.1108/09684889710156558

Christensen, L. B., Johnson, B., & Turner, L. A. (2015). *Research methods, design, and analysis* (12th ed.). Pearson Education Limited.

Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Ellingson, L. L. (2014). "The truth must dazzle gradually": Enriching relationship research using a crystallization framework. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 31(4), 442–450. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407514523553

Fajet, W., Bello, M., Leftwich, S. A., Mesler, J. L., & Shaver, A. N. (2005). Pre-service teachers' perceptions in beginning education classes. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(6), 717–727. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.05.002

Fielding, M. (2001). Beyond the rhetoric of student voice: New departures or new constraints in the transformation of 21st century schooling? *FORUM: For Promoting 3–19 Comprehensive Education*, 43(2), 100–112. https://doi.org/10.2304/forum.2001.43.2.1

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363

Gravett, S., Henning, E., & Eiselen, R. (2011). New teachers look back on their university education: Prepared for teaching, but not for life in the classroom. *Education as Change*, 15(sup1), S123–S142. https://doi.org/10.1080/16823206.2011.643636

Karabel, J. (2005). *The chosen: The hidden history of admission and exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton.* Houghton Mifflin Company.

Kelley, R. (2016). *Black Shy, buck struggle.* New Democracy Forum.

Kerr, C. (2001). *The uses of the university*. Harvard University Press. https://books.google.co.za/books?id=OeeZAAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=es#v=one page&q&f=false,Trans.

Kiggundu, E., & Nayimuli, S. (2009). Teaching practice: A make or break phase for student teachers. *South African Journal of Education*, 29(3), 345–358. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v29n3a129

Lamanauskas, V., Augiene, D., & Makarskaite-Petkeviciene, R. (2012, August). Problems of university education in Lithuania: Student point of view. *International Education Studies*, 5(4), 196–211. https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v5n4p196

Lategan, L. (2009). The university as key concept in higher education studies. A journey with research into a conceptual analysis of a university. In E. Bitzer (Ed.), (pp. 53-70). *Higher education in South Africa. A scholarly look behind the scenes*. Stellenbosch: Sun Media.

Le Grange, L. (2009). The university in a contemporary era: reflections on epistemological shifts. In E. Bitzer (Ed.), *Higher Education in South Africa. A Scholarly Look Behind the Scenes* (pp. 103-120). Stellenbosch: Sun Media.

Matoti, S. N. (2010). The unheard voices of educators: Perceptions of educators about the state of education in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 24(4), 568–584. https://journals-co-za.uplib.idm.oclc.org/content/high/24/4/EJC37630

Matoti, S. N., & Odora, R. J. (2013). Student teachers' perceptions of their experiences of teaching practice. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 27(1), 126–143. https://journals-co-za.uplib.idm.oclc.org/content/high/27/1/EJC142792

Mheta, G., Lungu, B. N., & Govender, T. (2018). Decolonisation of the curriculum: A case study of the Durban university of technology in South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*, 38(4), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v38n4a1635

Miles, M., & Huberman, A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Mingat, A. (1998). The strategy used by high-performing Asian economies in education: Some lessons for developing countries. *World Development*, 26(4), 697–700. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(98)00001-1

Mokoena, S. (2012). Pre-service teachers' perceptions of their preparedness for teaching. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 32(2), 183–192. https://doi.org/10.1080/09718923.2012.11893064

Molla, T., & Cuthbert, D. (2018). Re-imagining Africa as a knowledge economy: Premises and promises of recent higher education development initiatives. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 53(2), 250–267. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909616677370

Mutekwe, E. (2017). Unmasking the Ramifications of the fees-must-fall-conundrum in higher education institutions in South Africa: A critical perspective. *Perspectives in Education*, 35(2), 142–154. https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v35i2.11

Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2016). *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at resilient colonialism in South Africa*. Langaa Research & Publishing CIG.

Prosser, J., & Burke, C. (2008). Image-Based Educational Research: Childlike Perspectives. In J. Knowles & Cole (Eds.), Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research (pp. 407–421). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Republic of South Africa. (2013). *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training*. Building an Expanded, Effective and Integrated Post-School System. http://www.dhet.gov.za/SiteAssets/Latest%20News/White%20paper%20for%20post-school%20education%20and%20training.pdf

Richardson, L., & Adams, E. (2018). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed., pp. 818–838). Sage.

Rule, P., & Vaughn, J. (2011). *Your guide to case study research*. Van Schaik.

Smith, & Webster. (1997a). Changing ideas of the university. In A. Smith & F. Webster (Eds.), *The postmodern university?: Contested visions of higher education in society*. Society for Research into Higher Education; Open University Press.

Smith, & Webster. (1997b). Conclusion: An affirming flame. In A. Smith & F. Webster (Eds.), (pp. 1-14). *The postmodern university?: Contested visions of higher education in society*. Society for Research into Higher Education; Open University Press.

Tinto, V. (2017). Through the eyes of students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 19(3), 254–269. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115621917

Tomasevski, K. (2003). Education Denied. Cost and Remedies. London & New York.

Tracy, S. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "Big-Tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121

Trow, M. (2006). Decline of diversity, autonomy, and trust in British Education. *Society*, 43(6), 77–86. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02698490

University of Pretoria. (2018). *UP profile statistics - Student numbers as in November 2018*. Bureau for Institutional Research and Planning. Department of Institutional Planning. The University of Pretoria.

Van Wyk, M. M. (2017). An e-portfolio as empowering tool to enhance students' self-directed learning in a teacher education course: A case of a South African university. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 31(3), 274–291. https://doi.org/10.20853/31-3-834

Vandeyar, S., & Swart, R. (2019). Shattering the silence: Dialogic engagement about education protest actions in South African University classrooms. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 24(6), 772–788. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1502170

Varadharajan, M., Buchanan, J., & Schuck, S. (2018). Changing course: The paradox of the career change student-teacher. *Professional Development in Education*, 44(5), 738–749. https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2017.1423369

Walker, M. (2019). *No curriculum transformation without epistemic justice capabilities* [Paper presentation]. *Invited public lecturer at the University of Pretoria*, South Africa.

World Bank. (2009). *Accelerating catch-up: Tertiary education for growth in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

Zgaga, P. (2012). Review of Ronald Barnett, Being a University. Studies in Philosophy and Education, 31(4). doi:10.1007/s11217-012-9292-9